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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 002009

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TAGS: PTER PARM PREL PREF YM OVID COUNTER TERRORISM

SUBJECT: YEMEN REQUESTS U.S. ROLE IN MANPADS BUY-BACK

REMAIN SECRET

REF: SANAA 1738

Classified By: Ambassador Krajeski for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S) Summary. Citing potential backlash from the tribes, price gouging by the merchants, and opposition from the street, National Security Bureau Deputy Ammar Saleh asked that any U.S. provided technical and financial assistance to buy-back illicit Yemeni MANPADS be kept secret. Ammar also shared information on ROYG procedures for collecting illicit weapons, discussed current ROYG official stocks, and proposed a joint plan to store MANPADS after collection and before destruction. Ammar stressed that ROYG would not accept an inspection of its own official MANPAD stock. End Summary.

The Case of the Missing MANPADS

¶12. (S) President Saleh's point-man on illicit MANPADS, Ammar Saleh, met with DATT and Pol/Econ Chief on August 18. Saleh discussed the on-going question of the missing 1000 plus MANPADS (Note: In July 2003 EmbOffs viewed 1100 MANPADS recovered from the illegal market, compared to just 79 in a July 2004 inspection. End Note). He explained that the Ministry of Defense (MOD) distributed these systems to its own forces, adding "they bought them, they own them, they can do what they like with them." As for the 79 still in the warehouse, Ammar said these would not be deployed to the army but sold and destroyed as part of the tabled buy-back. (Comment: We are not surprised by this largesse as most of the 79 systems are obsolete. See Reftel. End Comment).

The Official Stock

¶13. (S/NF) As for a serialized current account of official MANPADS stock, Ammar told us this information was "top secret" adding, "Why would you want to know?" DATT suggested

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that our interest stemmed from the leakage of official Yemeni MANPADS into the hands of al-Qa'ida terrorists in Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Saleh agreed that this must be prevented in the future, claiming that these systems were smuggled out of Yemen during the chaos of the 1994 civil war. As for a good estimate of the number of illicit MANPADS in Yemen, "Impossible!" says Ammar, "We just don't know."

Please Keep Your Assistance Secret

¶14. (S) Saleh requested that the role of the U.S. in financing the proposed buy-back be kept secret. The arms merchants, he said, will increase their prices if they know that U.S. money is behind the program. As for the tribal Sheikhs -- they may be willing to sell their MANPADS to the ROYG, but not necessarily to the USG. The opposition Islah party, he added, would use U.S. participation to rally public opinion against the President.

The "Big Fish" How the ROYG conducts Buy-Backs

¶15. (S) Ammar produced a list of 29 names which he described as the "big fish" Yemeni arms merchants. These individuals collect illicit weapons of all types and then sell them to the Ministry of Defense. In addition to MANPADS, the merchants collect all types of SA/LW and explosives. As for the price list, "Ammar showed us an old one in Arabic" adding, "but in truth it depends on which dealers have the best relationship with MOD officials."

To Avoid a Bait and Switch

¶16. (S) Ammar said he did not want MANPADS collected under the new U.S.-funded buy-back to be stored in MOD warehouses, where official and non-official stock may get "mixed-up." Instead, he proposed that the NSB would buy land near Sanaa, if the U.S. would be willing to build a storage facility

there -- the purpose being to properly store MANPADS until they can be destroyed.

Comment

17. (S) The meeting with the NSB served as an initial discussion of our expectations and a first go at coordinating the A/S visit. A scenesetter will follow to suggest an itinerary for the visit. We should consider Ammar's no-inventory assertion as an opening not a final position, although we can expect our proposal to be met with great suspicion. We will also have to push back firmly on his suggestion to rely on arms merchants in the buy-back process. The idea is to wean the ROYG from old habits, not reinforce them. End Comment.

KRAJESKI